

## **State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Meeting Minutes**

### **North Carolina NRCS**

**Date:** August 13, 2026

**Meeting Format:** Hybrid – in-person and virtual participation

**Meeting Length:** Approximately 2 hours and 35 minutes

**Main Topic:** North Carolina NRCS conservation program, technical, easement, resource concern, partnership, and FY2027 planning updates.

### **Attendees:**

The meeting included representatives from USDA-NRCS, North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, North Carolina Division of Soil and Water Conservation, North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North Carolina Wildlife Federation, RAFI, National Grazing Lands Coalition, North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation, North Carolina State Grange, Eastern North Carolina Sentinel Landscape Partnership, Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Project, and other conservation partners. Individual introductions were provided at the beginning of the meeting.

### **Summary:**

The August STAC meeting focused on strengthening partner engagement in North Carolina's conservation delivery system while reviewing FY2026 program accomplishments and preparing for FY2027. Major discussions included proposed changes to STAC operations, FY2027 priority resource concerns, regenerative agriculture implementation, Source Water Protection Areas, EQIP and CSP funding outcomes, forestry and wildlife investments, easement delivery, updated conservation practices, watershed activities, and expanded use of Technical Service Providers.

NRCS leadership emphasized the importance of maintaining a locally led conservation process and increasing opportunities for partners to influence technical and financial priorities. Participants generally supported simplified conservation delivery while emphasizing the need to evaluate funding outcomes, maintain clear producer communication, and ensure conservation priorities continue to be addressed.

### **Key Decisions Made:**

- STAC meeting frequency: North Carolina NRCS announced plans to conduct four full State Technical Advisory Committee meetings annually beginning in FY2027, with the next meeting anticipated for November 2026.
- Subcommittee leadership: Beginning in FY2027, STAC subcommittees are expected to transition toward partner-led operations, including partner responsibility for convening meetings and developing agendas. NRCS will continue participating and providing technical support.
- FY2027 assessments: North Carolina will continue using identified state priority resource concerns to provide consistency in required assessments across applicable conservation programs. Partners were invited to review the proposed priorities and provide additional recommendations.
- FY2027 IMPAC: North Carolina was identified as a pilot state for IMPAC 2.0. NRCS representatives will participate in national training and planning before determining specific FY2027 implementation procedures.

- Interim Conservation Practice 822: North Carolina received approval to offer the interim practice related to non-ruminant livestock outdoor management of vegetated cover. State technical documents and implementation requirements still need to be completed before full implementation.
- Interim Practice 827: Approval of the proposed strategic harvested forest management interim practice remained pending at the time of the meeting.
- Urban conservation: North Carolina plans to make low tunnels and raised beds available through its conservation delivery/payment schedule.
- Source Water Protection Areas: No immediate geographic changes were adopted. Existing designated areas remain in place while NRCS and partners continue evaluating whether future modifications are warranted.
- EQIP/CSP deferrals: Applicants whose applications are not funded must affirm their continued interest following receipt of a deferral notification. Failure to respond within the prescribed period may result in cancellation of the application.

**Discussion Highlights:** *STAC Structure and Partner Engagement*

State Conservationist Matt Walker emphasized that STAC should function as a two-way forum rather than primarily as a venue for NRCS presentations. Partners were encouraged to use STAC and its subcommittees to help identify conservation needs and influence North Carolina's technical and financial priorities. NRCS also expressed interest in using future meetings to highlight partner programs, emerging conservation technologies, and successful conservation approaches. The planned increase to four meetings annually is intended to improve communication and provide more consistent opportunities for partner engagement.

**FY2026 Ranking and Conservation Delivery:**

NRCS reviewed feedback regarding the transition toward a simplified one-farm/one-assessment/one-contract approach. Field feedback was generally favorable because the approach reduced the need to conduct multiple assessments.

Partners agreed that simplification has potential benefits for producers and field staff but requested additional evaluation of the final FY2026 funding outcomes. Participants specifically expressed interest in understanding which applications were funded versus unfunded and whether simplification affected priority resource concerns or conservation outcomes.

Partners also requested that future program reporting include appropriate conservation success stories in addition to numerical obligation and contracting data. NRCS indicated that more complete FY2026 program results should be available for discussion at the November STAC meeting.

**FY2027 Priority Resource Concerns:**

NRCS presented proposed FY2027 state priority resource concerns intended to establish greater consistency in conservation assessments across programs and land uses. The committee discussed how priority resource concerns apply to specific land uses, including associated agricultural land and farmstead. NRCS clarified that designation as a state priority does not prevent other legitimate resource concerns from being identified and addressed through conservation planning. Partners were encouraged to review the proposed list following the meeting and provide recommendations to NRCS before the FY2027 priorities are finalized.

**Regenerative Agriculture:**

NRCS reviewed requirements associated with the regenerative agriculture initiative, including the five-year contract framework, whole-farm assessment concept, applicable soil and water resource concerns, soil health testing, and use of identified primary conservation practices. Discussions emphasized that the producer helps define the operational area constituting the “whole farm” for purposes of the assessment. Partners noted that producers may require additional communication and education to fully understand their role in identifying objectives and participating in the planning process. Participants also discussed the requirement to address applicable soil and water resource concerns and questioned how that requirement could affect smaller operations or producers with numerous identified concerns. NRCS explained that individual conservation practices may address multiple resource concerns and that conventional EQIP opportunities remain available for producers whose objectives do not align with the regenerative agriculture framework. NRCS reported substantial FY2026 demand for regenerative agriculture through EQIP, while CSP participation presented additional challenges.

**Source Water Protection**

NRCS and North Carolina DEQ discussed the methodology used to identify Source Water Protection Areas. The selection process considered source-water assessment/protection areas, watershed geography, public water sources, agricultural land use, and conservation delivery capacity. A correction was made during the meeting clarifying that designated Source Water Protection Areas are limited to approximately 20 percent of the state’s land area, rather than the 25 percent initially stated. DEQ indicated that current source water areas are relatively stable. Participants discussed whether future needs might justify changes in geographic targeting, particularly in areas of eastern North Carolina. No changes were made during the meeting.

**Easement Program Update:**

NRCS reported substantial easement activity during FY2026, including two signup periods and continued work on a significant inventory of active easement projects. A major discussion centered on barriers affecting easement closing timelines, particularly the availability of qualified surveyors, appraisers, and title professionals. Participants noted that these capacity limitations extend beyond NRCS and affect conservation easement organizations statewide. Potential solutions discussed included expanded training for appraisal professionals, increasing the pool of qualified service providers, and continuing use of coordinated deliverable schedules among NRCS and easement partners.

**Forestry and Wildlife:**

The Forestry/Wildlife Subcommittee emphasized improving communication and coordination of training opportunities between NRCS and conservation partners. NRCS also discussed making state-specific payment information easier for partners and producers to use by filtering national payment information to practices and scenarios applicable in North Carolina. FY2026 program reporting indicated that North Carolina was exceeding the statutory EQIP wildlife funding target at the time of the meeting, with more than \$6 million directed toward wildlife-related conservation activities. Examples discussed included longleaf pine, aquatic habitat, early successional habitat, pollinator habitat, and other wildlife-related conservation work. The committee requested additional analysis of forestry applications and funding by geographic region once FY2026 obligations are complete.

**FY2026 EQIP and CSP Program Delivery:**

NRCS reported that approximately 70 percent of FY2026 EQIP and CSP funding had been obligated at the time of the meeting, with additional contracting continuing through the remainder of the fiscal year. North Carolina received approximately \$44 million in EQIP funding and nearly \$24 million in CSP funding for FY2026. Final obligation figures and program outcomes were not yet available and are expected to be more fully reviewed after fiscal-year closeout.

**Application Deferrals and Producer Communication:**

NRCS emphasized an important change affecting unfunded applications. Producers receiving a deferral notification must communicate that they remain interested in pursuing funding. NRCS indicated that deferral notifications could begin after October 1, with approximately 30 days anticipated for producers to respond. Partners were encouraged to reinforce this requirement with producers because applications may otherwise be canceled and require resubmission. NRCS also encouraged interested producers to submit applications early rather than waiting for a formal FY2027 application deadline.

**Engineering and Watershed Programs:**

NRCS provided updates on Emergency Watershed Protection, Watershed and Flood Prevention Projects, and dam rehabilitation activities. The agency reported approximately \$170 million in locally led agreements associated with emergency watershed activities, including work associated with Hurricane Helene and other storm events. Common EWP conservation activities discussed included Streambank and Shoreline Protection (CPS 580) and Clearing and Snagging (CPS 326). Engineering staff also continue working on watershed planning and dam rehabilitation efforts while updating conservation practice standards and statements of work.

**Technical Service Providers and 900-Series Activities**

NRCS discussed expanded opportunities to use certified Technical Service Providers (TSPs) for conservation planning, design, installation oversight, and certification. The 900-series activities are intended to increase conservation delivery capacity as financial assistance workloads increase while agency staffing remains constrained. Partners were encouraged to inform qualified professionals about opportunities to become certified TSP's. NRCS leadership also discussed the continued importance of partner capacity and indicated that future funded cooperative arrangements would be pursued through competitive processes consistent with applicable federal requirements.

**Action Items & Next Steps:**

- NRCS/ECS: Distribute the proposed FY2027 priority resource concern information to STAC participants and collect partner comments before finalization.
- STAC members and partners: Review the FY2027 priority resource concerns and submit recommended changes or additions to NRCS.
- NRCS leadership: Conduct the next full STAC meeting in November 2026 and continue development of the four-meeting annual structure for FY2027.
- STAC subcommittees/partners: Begin preparing for transition toward partner-led subcommittee meetings and agenda development during FY2027.
- NRCS Programs/ECS: Participate in upcoming IMPAC 2.0 pilot training and determine implications for North Carolina's FY2027 conservation delivery.
- NRCS: Provide more complete FY2026 EQIP/CSP obligation, contracting, funding-pool, and outcome information at a future STAC meeting following fiscal-year closeout.

- NRCS: Consider providing anonymized conservation success stories alongside future program allocation reporting.
- NRCS: Evaluate opportunities to provide regional breakdowns of forestry applications, funded projects, and unmet demand.